



# **WHITE SAVIOR NARRATIVE IN TATE TAYLOR'S *THE HELP***

## **A FINAL PROJECT**

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Submitted by:

Izzatin Naela H.

13020115120054

**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
DIPONEGORO UNIVERSITY  
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## **PRONOUNCEMENT**

The writer sincerely acknowledges that she compiles this thesis entitled ‘White Savior Narrative in Tate Taylor’s *The Help*’ by herself without taking any result from other researchers in S-1, S-2, S-3, and in diploma degree of any university. In addition, the writer also asserts she does not quote any material from the existed someone’s journal or paper and other publications except from the references mentioned later.

Semarang, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Izzatin Naela Husna

## MOTTO AND DEDICATION

No matter how hard the situation is, don't forget to always smile like an idiot.

*Park Chanyeol*

The expert in anything was once a beginner.

*Anonymous*

Allah SWT does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear.

*Al-Baqarah (2:286)*

*This final project is dedicated for my  
parents, my family, my friends and my  
future.*

**APPROVAL**  
**WHITE SAVIOR NARRATIVE IN TATE TAYLOR'S THE HELP**

**Written by:**

**Izzatin Naela Husna**  
**NIM: 13020115120054**

is approved by Thesis Advisor  
on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Thesis Advisor,

M. Irfan Zamzami, S.S., M.Hum  
NIK. 198609230115091086

The Head of English Departement,

Dr. Agus Subiyanto, M.A.  
NIP. 196408141990011001

## **VALIDATION**

Approved by

Strata 1 Thesis Examination Committee

Faculty of Humanity Diponegoro University

On 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2019

Chair Person,

First Member,

Arido Laksono, S.S., M.Hum.

Rifka Pratama, S.Hum, M.A.

NIP. 197507111999031002

NPPU. H. 7. 199004282018071001

Second Member,

Third Member,

Retno Wulandari, S.S., M.A.

Dra. Wiwiek Sundari, M.Hum

NIP. 197505252005012002

NIP. 197802282005021001

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## TABLE OF CONTENT

PRONOUNCEMENT.....	ii
MOTTO AND DEDICATION.....	iii
APPROVAL.....	iv
VALIDATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENT.....	ix
ABSTRACT.....	x
1. Introduction.....	1
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	4
2.1 Definition of Character.....	4
2.2 Theme.....	4
2.3 White Savior Narrative.....	5
2.4 Racial Discrimination in the US.....	5
RESEARCH METHOD.....	2
DISCUSSION.....	9
4.1 Characters.....	9
4.2. The Background.....	9
4.3. The Actions and the Effects.....	12
4.3.1. Defending the Maids.....	12
4.3.2. Writing a False Article.....	13
4.3.3. The Conflict and The Help.....	14
4.3.4. Giving All the Profits.....	15
4.4. People’s Reactions about the Book.....	15
CONCLUSION.....	17
REFERENCES.....	19

## ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination has been being the sensitive issue to discuss. Especially in the United States that is commonly known by its slavery during the 1960s where Blacks were always the victims. Those discriminations bring out so many movies discussing about that issue. One of the movies that discuss about racial discrimination is *The Help*. The aim of this study is to analyze the major theme happens in the movie entitled *The Help* by Tate Taylor. One of the major themes discussed in the movie is white savior narrative which is represented by the main character. The textual analysis method is used to analyze the intrinsic element of the movie. Close reading and close viewing are also used in this research to help the writer analyze the movie. In this study, the writer found that the actions of the main character helping the Black maids in the movie can be called as white savior narrative because the main character help the Black maids to fight for their rights. To sum up, not all white people in the 1960's in America were racist as told in the movie.

**Keywords:** *White Savior Narrative, Themes, Racial Discrimination, The Black Maids*



## 1. Introduction

Racial discrimination has become a great issue since then until now. The minority in some parts of the world still experiencing this kind of discrimination because of their differences especially their skin color and their races. According to an article in New York Post, an ex-employee of *facebook* that is black experienced discrimination at least three times a day where his co-workers will look directly at him and hold their wallet tightly until he passed. This case is just one of thousand cases of discrimination that happened in real life. The association between race and various attributes and judgments, revealing that, on average, individuals more readily associate positive attributes and stereotypes with whites than with other races, particularly blacks (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013). Racial discrimination is an act treating someone differently based on their skin color, race, religion, ethnic, nationality, and etc. Based on ACT Human Rights Commission, racial discrimination is divided into two, which are direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. Direct discrimination means that someone treats you unfairly or unequally because of your race, meanwhile indirect discrimination means a requirement or rule that seems to be the same for everyone, but in fact disadvantages people because of their race (2011).

A lot of movies and books are discussing this issue and becoming a great literary work. Racial discrimination issue in the past was presented through the abusive acts, such as slavery. Slavery and racial discrimination are something that cannot be separated if talking about issue on the movie about racism. In some movies and books that are discussing about racial discrimination or slavery are not

all only contain one issue, some of them are discussing about social class, poverty, migrations, and also some of them are discussing about white savior narrative.

White savior narrative is a white character in a movie that is usually being a hero for a particular race. In this case, we talk about black people depicted in the movie. The White Savior trope is so widespread that “varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites)” (Hughey 2014:2).

One of the movies that discusses white savior narrative is a movie by Tate Taylor entitled *The Help*. There are a lot of issues discussed in this movie and one of them is white savior narrative. *The Help* is a movie that written and directed by Tate Taylor, based on the best-seller book written by Kathryn Stockett. It is produced by Brunson Green, Chris Columbus and Michael Barnathan and released by DreamWorks Pictures. It was released on August 10, 2011 in United States. The duration of this movie is 2 hours 26 minutes. Emma Stone, Viola Davis, Octavia Spencer, and Bryce Dallas Howard are the main actresses of this movie. This movie is about the black maids who receive racial discrimination from their boss and white people around them. *The Help* won 1 Oscar, another 79 wins & 108 nominations (Roger, 2011).

In this paper, the writer will discuss how the white savior narrative can change black maid's life by her actions and how white people in the movie react about her action. The intrinsic element discussed in this paper is the theme. One of the major themes in the movie is white savior narrative because the movie mainly

discuss about the white savior narrative. The racial discrimination in 1960s in the US is discussed in this paper to support the findings. In the movie the main character wrote a book about the black maids that became a best-seller books and how the book slowly made the black maids' life change. The writer is interested to analyze this movie because unlike the other movie about racial discrimination, another issue that being discussed in this movie is also emphasized.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The writer will develop the theoretical framework in this chapter to analyze the movie. Theories and concept that will suit best to study the movie is the concept of character, theme, white savior narrative, new racism, and racial discrimination in the US. The first concept is to understand what kind of character and theme will bring out the white savior narrative in the movie. Meanwhile, racial discrimination in the US is to support the background of the white savior narrative because she did her act to help the maids in the movie from racial discrimination. The theme is to explain the main topic of white savior narrative in the movie.

### **2.1 Definition of Character**

According to Vladimir Propp (1968), character was primarily a “type,” one that served different narrative functions. An inconsiderate person, for example, might best be described as one who lacks the trait of consideration for others, one whose behavior noticeably lacks such consideration, rather than one who has the trait of behaving inconsiderately (Goldie 2004: 16). A character is person that has one specific role in the literary work and makes the literary work have more impact.

### **2.2 Theme**

Thrall and Hibbard (1936) state that theme is the center or the dominant idea of a literary work. Theme can also be described as the main idea or the underlined meaning of literary works, and it can be directly or indirectly stated (Literary Devices). Theme can be divided into two types, major and minor themes. A major

theme is an idea that the writer wants to show the most in his literary work, it makes the most important idea in the work. While the minor theme is the idea that appears only for once and does not affect the story or literary work.

In this definition, white savior narrative can be defined as major theme because this appears in most of the screen time of the movie. While the minor themes that appear in the movie will be supporting statements for the findings in the paper. From the explanation, hence the writer tries to examine the white savior narrative as the major theme of the movie.

### **2.3 White Savior Narrative**

White savior narrative is a character or narration that helps Black people against discrimination. “White savior narratives centralize and normalize the white experience through the representation of people of color as unable to escape their social and cultural marginalization without the guidance and leadership of a single white actor.” (Carrarota, 2010; Hughey, 2010; Shome, 1996)

The white savior narrative is usually helps Black people against the discrimination that happens toward them. This kind of character usually appears in the movie that discuss about discrimination. Even though not all racial-discrimination-themed movie including this kind of character, sometimes white savior narrative is important to show the real meaning of a movie. This character helps to improve the movie and the storyline.

### **2.4 Racial Discrimination in the US**

The United Nations describes racial discrimination as,

“...any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect



of nullifying or impairing the recognition enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.” (1965)

As depicted in the movie, in 1960s the Black people are still fighting for their rights as in humanity rights and in living rights. The direct discrimination by white people towards Black people at that time happens not only in private places like houses when they are working but also in public places like restaurant and parks. White people will show that they do not like the Black people by looking at them as if they are “trash” or even do not want to get close to them.

Thus, racial discrimination is something usual back then in America. People receive different treatment just because of their race, skin color, and religion. The example of racial discrimination nowadays is the policy of America current president that prohibit some immigrants to live in America just because of their religion and their race. This process of discrimination will be the base of defining their behavior and their social class. This kind of process also makes people to behave according to the group they belong to. In this movie, the racial discrimination is strongly affected the Black people to act in their society.

## **2.5 Definition of Activist**

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, activist is a person who uses or supports strong actions (such as public protest) in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue. An activist is a person who practices trace out and map the lines of a society at specific zones – its intensities and boundaries – with a view to grafting an outside onto them (Svirsky, 2010). In the movie, the main

character indirectly helps the Black to get their rights back by against the law controlling the Blacks at that time.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses textual analysis method to analyze the movie. Textual analysis method is divided into three, which are close reading, close listening, and close viewing. In this research the writer uses the close reading and close viewing reviewed from the source used in this research. The source for this method is divided into two, namely the primary source and the secondary source.

The primary source of this research is movie *The Help* by Tate Taylor that released in 2011. Meanwhile the secondary source of this research is scientific journals and textbooks that will help with the analysis in this research study. For the research approach, the writer will use sociological approach to discuss the issue in the movie. According to X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (1976), when using the sociological approach, a critic "examines literature in the cultural, economic, and political context in which it is written or received." Sociological approach is used because the issue discussed in the movie also happened in society.

## DISCUSSION

In this part, the writer will discuss about white savior narrative and the characters in Tate Taylor's movie *The Help*. The discussion will be divided into four sub-sections. First, it will discuss about the characters in the movie. Second, it will discuss the background of the main character actions. Three, it will discuss the actions of the main character and the effects of main character actions toward the black maid's life in the movie. The fourth sub-section will discuss the reaction of white people in the movie when they found out about the actions of the main character.

### 4.1 Characters

A character is person that has one specific role in the literary work and makes the literary work have more impact. According to the movie, this movie has three lead roles or three main characters that make the storyline of the movie has more impact. Those three main characters are Skeeter Pheelan, Aibileen, and Minny Jackson.

### 4.2. The Background

The story revolves around Skeeter Pheelan (the main character), Aibileen (the black maids), and Minny Jackson (the black maids). Skeeter is a fresh graduate student, who just came home and is looking for a job. Her dream job is a writer and later she gets a job to write an article which answers the reader's questions about housekeeping in a newspaper office. She then tries to ask one of her friends'

maid, Aibileen, to help her answering the questions. At first her friend, Elizabeth, who is Aibileen's boss allowed Skeeter to ask Aibileen about housekeeping, but then she does not allow her to get close to Aibileen because of some reasons.

As depicted in the movie, the maids are receiving a racial discrimination. They are discriminated because of their skin color. Australian Human Rights Commission describes racial discrimination as situation when a person is treated less favorably than another person in a similar situation because of their race, color, descent, national or ethnic origin or immigrant status. (2014)

At that time, whites do not allowed to interact too much with the Black people or black people. Most of the whites in the movie are treating the Black maids like 'something' they should avoid because they believe that the Black people bring so many diseases. Skeeter feels that this is unfair because she was raised by the Black maid in her house. When she comes to Elizabeth's house, one of her friends says that she is planning the law about sanitation towards Black maids. Every time her friends are talking about the maids and the law controlling them, Skeeter always feels sorry to the maid that they had to hear the conversations between her and her friends.

Skeeter : Thank you, Aibileen. All that talk in there today...  
 Aibileen : Hilly's talk?  
 Skeeter : I'm sorry you had to hear that. Is that Preacher Green's sermon?  
 Aibileen : Yes, ma'am, it is.  
 (The Help (2011), 16:44-17:06)

Even though Skeeter's friends are very racist, she is not. She even said sorry to Aibileen about the conversation she had with her friends. As she gets

close with Aibileen, Skeeter tells her about her wish in writing a book about the maids. She wants everyone to know how it feels like to be the maids, how the whites treated them, how they get paid, and etc. Aibileen refuses to help Skeeter writing her book at first because it is against the law and she does not want to get in trouble but Skeeter make sure to hide everything about her and make it as a secret that nobody will know their real identities. At the end Aibileen is willing to share her stories.

It is like a long journey to make Aibileen accepts her request. She even comes to Aibileen in public, which at that time if the whites interact with Black people, people will stare at them as if they do something weird and wrong. After Aibileen accepts her request, Skeeter comes to Aibileen house the night after Aibileen comes home from work. She tells her the stories about her being maid and all. The second night when Aibileen shares her stories with Skeeter, Minny(another black maid) comes and surprised to see Skeeter in Aibileen's house. Skeeter also asks for Minny's help but she refuses to do so. Minny asks the reason why she writes her book.

Minny : And just what makes you think colored people need your help? Why do you care?

Aibileen : Minny.

Minny : Maybe you just want to get Aibileen in trouble.

Skeeter : No. I want to show her perspective. So people might understand what it's like from your side.

Minny : Well, it's a real Fourth of July picnic. It's what we dream of doing all weekend long. Get back into they house, polish the silver. And we just love not making minimum wage or getting Social Security. And how we love they children when they little. And then they turn out just like they mamas.

Skeeter : I know. Maybe things can change.

Minny : What law's gonna say you gotta be nice to your maid?

Aibileen : You don't have to do this now, Minny.  
 Minny : You damn right I don't! You two give me the heart palpitations.  
 (The Help (2011), 57:44-58:35)

From the dialogue we know how Skeeter wants to help them and how the maid feels when they work in a white family. It shows how desperate it is when the baby they love turns out like their mother when they get older and it upsets the maid. Skeeter knows that fact but she wants to change that by writing the book. Besides, she never thinks the Black maid is like what people think because she loves her maid that raised her. That is why she wants to write her book and help people's perspective about the Black maids.

### **4.3. The Actions and the Effects**

Skeeter's actions in helping the Black maids in the movie can also be called as white savior narrative. The white savior narrative can also be defined as a new form of racism. New racism can be described as a more indirect, more subtle, more procedural, more ostensibly nonracial (Pettigrew 1979, 118). Skeeter can be defined as the white savior because she helps the whites to build the image of hero and a savior of the Black people.

#### **4.3.1. Defending the Maids**

Beside writing the book that she hopes will change people perspective toward the Black maids, Skeeter also stands for the maid when her friends are talking about the law that control the Black people. When her friend, Hilly, talks about the bathroom in front of Aibileen, she clearly shows her dislike expression about the law of bathroom she talks. She even refutes her friend's argument.



Hilly : Aibileen, are you enjoying your new bathroom over at Elizabeth's'? Nice to have your own. Isn't it, Aibileen?  
 Aibileen : Yes, ma'am. And I thank you.  
 Hilly : Separate, but equal. That's what Ross Barnett says, and you can't argue with the governor.  
 Skeeter : Well, certainly not in Mississippi, the birthplace of modern-day government.  
 (The Help (2011), 01:10:57-01:11:20)

Skeeter even lies to her friend about the conversation she had with her friend's maid because she does not want her friend to know that she is working on a book about the maid.

Skeeter : I understand.  
 Hilly : What do you understand, Skeeter?  
 Skeeter : Yule Mae was just saying how excited she is that her boys are going to college.  
 Hilly : Did you also ask Miss Skeeter if you could borrow money?  
 Skeeter : Of course not.  
 (The Help (2011), 01:12:19-01:12:33)

Skeeter's defense towards the maid can be seen from the dialogue above. She really does not want the maid to get in the trouble.

#### **4.3.2. Writing a False Article.**

Another action that supports her as a main character that helps black maids or being a hero for Black maids happens when Hilly asks Skeeter to put her initiative on a newspaper, because Skeeter is working on a newspaper, to help people by



dropping an old coat to her house; Skeeter writes *commode* instead. It shows that this is one of her protest towards the 'same but equal' toilet concept that Hilly has proposed. In 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi, racial discrimination was a hot issue because there were a lot of Black people spoke up and it was aired in national news. Skeeter is watching the national news with her maids when suddenly her mother comes and turns off the television. Skeeter is very mad about it because she thinks that her mom is also very racist, whereas she was not like that.

#### **4.3.3. The Conflict and The Help**

The book that Skeeter writes is going smooth at first, but when she sends her book to the publisher, they say that she needs more maids to make the book compatible. She is almost giving up with the book because most of the maids are afraid to share their stories. The condition in Jackson at that time was in chaos because one of the maids was arrested by police. The maid was accused of stealing her boss' ring and there were a shot by KKK that makes the condition worse. Skeeter wants to do something but she cannot do anything.

One day when Skeeter is at the café, the waitress tells her to come to Aibileen's house and when she goes to Aibileen's house another maids are waiting for her to share their stories with her. The book continued but another problem comes. It is obvious that the book she writes comes from the maids in Jackson and they are afraid that people will find them. In Skeeter's circle, Hilly has the impact for society because she is the leader of charity event in the town. Minny is Hilly's ex-maid and she has a way to make people believe that the book is not from Jackson and she tells Skeeter terrible thing she did to Hilly but Skeeter refuses to

put it in the book. This act makes Skeeter look more like a white savior because she thinks it will be dangerous for the maids.

#### **4.3.4. Giving All the Profits**

After going through a lot of troubles, the book is finally finished and the maids put a lot of hopes about the book. They hope that after the book was published they will be treated differently and people will understand their feelings. The book is finally published with the title of *The Help* and it becomes a best-seller book at that time. Skeeter sends all the profits of the book to all the maids that helped her. It slowly changes the maids' life because they feel helped by the money that Skeeter sends to them. After she published that book she gets a new job at a magazine as an editor. The book is very famous in Jackson and almost everyone reads it. Even the pastor at their church read the book and said thank you to them for speaking the truth. The book really changed the maids' life into a better life.

According to the themes definition, theme is the center or the dominant idea of a literary work (Thrall and Hibbard, 1936). One of the main ideas of this movie is white savior narrative. Even though it was indirectly narrated, the white savior narrative in this movie is Skeeter, who is helping the Black maids fighting for their rights and helping them changing the white's perspective about them. Skeeter's actions make a great impact on the movie and all the actions that she did make her look like a hero to the black maids as the white savior narrative that saves their life.

#### **4.4. People's Reactions about the Book**

Some of white people in the movie that read her book feel that the book is very interesting. But when Skeeter's boyfriend found out about the writer of the book

he was very mad and wanted to break up with her. Hilly was going crazy when she reads the book and finds her story in there. She tells everyone that the book is garbage and tells her friends not to read it. Hilly then went to Skeeter's house and fight her because she 100% believes that it is her story written in the book.

Hilly wants to tell Skeeter's mom about the book but surprisingly her mother already read the book. Skeeter was very afraid of her mother reaction at first but it turns out that her mother supports her and she said she proud of her.

Skeeter's mother	: Eugenia. Take me inside, please.
Skeeter	: Yes, ma'am.
Skeeter's mother	: Skeeter, do you have plans tomorrow?
Skeeter	: No, ma'am.
Skeeter's mother	: Good. Because we are going shopping. No single daughter of mine is going to New York City representing the great state of Mississippi without a proper cosmopolitan wardrobe.
Skeeter	: How do you know about New York?
Skeeter's mother	: Oh, well, Miss Stein called last night. Courage sometimes skips a generation. Thank you for bringing it back to our family.

(The Help (2011), 02:03:36-02:04:33)

By the end of the movie, Skeeter succeed on making people change their perspectives about the maids and make people proud of what she did. Even though she succeed on changing people's perspectives, she cannot change Hilly's mind because she is too racist and her pride is too big to believe what is written in the book. At the end Aibileen lost her job at Elizabeth's house because of Hilly. It does not make her sad, but she is happy because Hilly believes that she wrote the book and she can convince her family's dream about being a writer. That is how Skeeter and the book change the maids' life.

## 5

### CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the movie *The Help* uses theme definition by Thrall and Hibbard, one of the major themes of the movie is white savior narrative. Even though it is not directly narrated that the main character is the white savior narrative, it can be summarized that the actions of the main character in the movie really gives an impact to the story of the movie as a white savior. Even the slavery era has already ended white people still think that black people is below them so they treat black people as they please. Moreover, there were so many Black activists that fought for human rights and racial equality at that time. Even though they struggled a lot, they never gave up fighting for equality. Although most of White people were racist at that time, not all of them were racist and willingly to help Black people fight for their rights.

Skeeter, the main character, can also be called an activist beside white savior because she indirectly helps the maids to get their rights back. The acts that Skeeter did to help them were wrote a book about Black maid to change's people perspective about them, defend Black maid when her friends talked something bad about the maids, lied to her friend about the maid, and gave all the book's profit to the maids that helped her.

Moreover, in the movie we can see two kinds of racism which are old racism and new racism. The act that Skeeter did can also be seen as the new racism because

it is more subtle, gentler and invisible. It is seen through the act of the main character in helping the maids and it leads us to the understanding that sometimes racism is not only in a harm and violence way but also in a very smooth way by giving the good image towards white people. But what actually the main character did in the movie is to help and change people's perspective about the Black maid, with no other meaning behind it.

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